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Democratic National Committee Revamp

Terry McAuliffe sets goals to attract Asian Pacific Americans

By Sam Chu Lin

Last week Terry McAuliffe, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, was in Pomona, Calif., where he witnessed the citizenship ceremony of a group of Asian Pacific Islanders. McAuliffe welcomed them with handshakes — and a message to join the Democratic Party.



DNC Chairman Terry McAuliffe

"There were 4,000 people there," McAuliffe said. "When they came out, we were there to hand out information, sign-up and register new Democrats. We are doing an aggressive voter registration program, voter education program, and an initiative to make it easier for people to understand ballots."

With a new round of elections slated to get underway in 2002 and 2004 — in the wake of a close and controversial presidential election, and with only one seat determining who holds a majority in the U.S. Senate — the national political parties are once again gearing up for battle. Democrats were first-in-line to try to woo California's APAs.

To the Frontlines

During his visit, McAuliffe said one of his top priorities is to hire Asian Americans to fill leadership roles.

"What we're doing as a national party is hiring an entirely new structure, a new executive director to run the operation so we can do an aggressive outreach program to the APA community all over the country," he said. "I've talked with Rep. Mike Honda about [this]. I

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have to hire a great organizer from the community ... to train young Asian Pacific grassroots organizers who can go out and identify and energize voters for us.”

Accompanying McAuliffe, Honda said that to ensure Asian Americans are part of the democratic process and the party, they need to hold leadership roles, and “shouldn’t be limited to just doing Asian American issues.”

“Members of our own community should be part of the DNC leadership, but people have to step forward and present their resumes,” Honda said. “Asian Americans can prove they have the skills and demonstrate that on a national level and become marketable in the private sector later.”

McAuliffe noted that Gail Stoltz, political director at the Democratic National Committee, is currently reviewing resumes and interviewing candidates for such leadership positions. The DNC is also launching a new effort to encourage Asian Americans to run for political office.

“We’re going out and aggressively recruiting candidates who are field organizers to our state parties,” he said. “We will provide the financial, technological and personnel resources to help them run and win elections. We really haven’t done that aggressively in the past, but I am committed to do that as we move forward.”

Addressing the Past

Honda reminded McAuliffe that the Asian American community is still struggling to get past the campaign fundraising scandals of the 1990s, during which several Asian Americans were prosecuted for making illegal contributions to the Democratic Party. Fearing further probes by Republicans, Democrats returned checks cut by those with Asian surnames. Leaders in the API community point to this as evidence that Asian American donors were unfairly targeted.

“I told Terry that particular issues put a chill on the participation of Asian Pacific Americans in politics,” Honda said. “The DNC did not handle the vetting of the checks that came in ... The party could have caught the mistakes and avoided a lot of mistakes.”

Honda said Asian Americans “have to be assured that it won’t happen again. The DNC has to make sure the checks are done properly, and we have to go out of our way to reassure people they will not be embarrassed and that we will do our job.”

McAuliffe, however, offered little reassurance, instead emphasizing that “we’ve got to move forward.” And he blamed Republicans for instigating the scandal.

Said McAuliffe: “What I say is, ‘Let’s not forget, it wasn’t the Democrats.’ It was investigators who worked for Republican Sen.

Fred Thompson and Rep. Dan Burton, who were calling everybody with an Asian name, and asking intimidating questions.”

No Apologies

On the subject of the Wen Ho Lee scandal and the incarceration of the former Los Alamos scientist, McAuliffe did not offer substantive comment. “It’s not my job to define the ideological base of our party,” he said. “My job is to go out and win elections.”

He pointed out that “80 percent of the APAs elected today are Democrats. Obviously, we’re successful because we’re paying attention to the issues that matter most to the API community,” he said.

The DNC chairman noted that the Democratic Party is allocating \$13.5 million dollars “to draw and assist in the redrawing of every state and congressional line in America. What we want to make sure is that we come out with lines that ensure diverse candidates can run and win. Asian Americans can be involved in that process.”

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